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Leggett, council at odds over budget

Furlough plan for county employees draws criticism

by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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Tough fiscal times are taking more than a toll on the county's budgets, but shortfalls and declining revenues also have the County Executive and council disagreeing about whose budget balancing is best.

County Executive Isiah Leggett and the council got into an intense debate over the county's budget and financial challenges Tuesday morning, with Leggett (D) telling the council that "we all need to get on the same page." Leggett's comments came during his monthly meeting with the County Council to discuss a range of issues from the budget to new department directors.

"In the past few years I've suggested substantial cuts and in your wisdom you've chosen not to make the cuts and have come in substantially higher than my recommendations," Leggett told the council.

He estimated the council has increased costs by \$40 million by restoring some public safety, education, and health and human services funding, and making changes to a savings plan.

At the same time, Leggett said, the council has also reduced revenue at the same time by not passing an ambulance fee and not increasing the property tax rate in the current budget.

Council President Michael J. Knapp and other council members took exception to Leggett's statements.

"Let's get on the same page, fine, but casting aspersions won't help," said Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, who argued that the council's final approved budget came in less than Leggett's recommendation.

Using one accounting method, the council's version of the budget is lower. Using another, Leggett's version is lower.

Tuesday's discussion began with Leggett justifying a proposed two-day furlough for county government as part of a savings plan.

Last week Leggett informed the council that county government employees could see at least two days of unpaid leave as part of a plan to find \$8 million savings this year and help close a \$250 million budget next year.

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Under Leggett's plan, the furloughs would affect all workers including public safety departments, which would schedule days off throughout the year to maintain staffing and services.

"This is just a small component to a much larger problem ... in a time when we have fewer and fewer options," Leggett said. "We've got to get on the same page or we're going to have the same problems."

In passing the current fiscal budget, which ends June 30, the council required county government and the school system to each cut \$8 million from their budgets to balance the county's financial books and close a \$297 million budget gap.

Some council members were unhappy with the furlough option.

"If we're already starting with furloughs, where do we go later?" asked Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring.

Start with salaries and compensation, recommended Councilman Philip M. Andrews.

With the county spending 80 percent of its budget in that area, "that's where the money is," said Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg. He voted against union contracts he considered "unsustainable" with cost of living and step increases averaging well above those seen in the private sector.

Leggett and various council members are talking with union leaders about possibly voluntarily renegotiating parts newly approved contracts.

"I've talked to [union officials] ... I don't think conversations will be as difficult as they were last year," Ervin said.

Without voluntary reductions from the unions and increased tax revenues, drastic cuts and more furlough days could become part of the equation to balance the budget Leggett said.

Tuesday's debate was one of the first public discussions between the two branches of government about overall budget and financing. During the budget deliberations earlier this year, several council members expressed individual frustration about some parts of Leggett's savings plans and recommended budgets, as well as his negotiations with the county's employee union. Leggett was disappointed with the council's restoration of his recommended cuts.

"I wanted to have a sober, realistic discussion of where we are," Leggett said after the meeting. "There has not been, in my opinion, the desire to make some the cuts necessary. Even if [the council] disagreed with the cuts I proposed, there were other options for cuts, but those were not made. And on top of that, things were added."

An economic outlook briefing is scheduled with the council in a few weeks. An update of the county's tax revenues is scheduled for November.

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